

# From Monocultural To Multicultural

*Virtual Team Challenge  
St. Petersburg University  
Graduate School of Management  
(GSOM SPbU)  
St. Petersburg, Russia*

**BY TATIANA ANDREEVA**

Three years ago, I wanted to design a project that would provide students in my cross-cultural course with much more exposure to other cultures. At the time, the cohort I was teaching was very monocultural—I had one or two international students, but the rest were Russians. They had traveled, but none had spent a semester abroad.

I didn't have the luxury of sending them on multiple international study trips, but I did have relationships with colleagues at member schools of the Global Alliance in Management Education (CEMS), an international alliance of academic and corporate institutions. Through that network, I have

partnered with several professors to design virtual team challenges, which require students at different schools to collaborate on a course project together, all through the use of technology. So far, these challenges have teamed our students with their counterparts at schools such as Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi in Italy, the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University in The Netherlands, ESADE Business School in Spain, the London School of Economics and Political Science in the United Kingdom, and Corvinus University of Budapest.

Three years later, virtual team projects are a standard part of several of my classes, including courses in culture, organizational behavior, and knowledge management. Each virtual team challenge includes collaborative research, a visual presentation and team report, a debriefing session at the end of the project, and individual papers in which students reflect on their experiences. Students receive two grades: a group grade for the project and an individual grade for their individual papers.

Students are assigned into teams, with members dispersed among several schools. We try to form teams with equal membership in each country, but that isn't always possible. Last semester, for example, I had 70 students in my class, my colleague in Italy had 80 students, and my colleague in Budapest had 17. In that case, teams each had three or four students from Russia and Italy, respectively, but only one student from Budapest.

But when a team is culturally imbalanced, it can provide a learning opportunity that we address during the debriefing. In our project with Corvinus, we asked the individual students from Budapest how it felt to be in the minority. We talked about how subgroups form and how team dynamics evolve as a result. This sparked discussion about how virtual teams can be more inclusive of all their members.

## Creative Collaboration

I have experimented with different formats for the virtual team



challenge. In one of our first challenges, members of each team visited subsidiaries of the same international company, or organizations with similar missions, in their home locations; then they prepared reports of their findings. For example, members of one team visited IKEAs in Russia and Italy; members of another compared the national post offices of Russia and Italy. In another challenge, students developed cross-cultural training scenarios for a fictional international company.

In both cases, the largely analytical projects had mixed results. Students turned in interesting reports, but we discovered that students could do much of the work independently.

I now assign projects that require joint creativity. Each team now creates a visual presentation—usually an image designed to solve a problem for a real or fictional company. Students also must justify their choices for the image in a final report.

Most recently, students created promotional campaigns designed to help cosmetics company L’Oreal attract more males to its largely

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female global workforce. The challenge for our students was to create a visual campaign that would fit into three different cultural contexts.

Because many students are accustomed to completing analytical projects in their business courses, they’re often worried that they’ll be graded on their graphic design skills with such an assignment. We assure them that it’s the quality of their idea, not their artwork, that will determine their success.

In analytical challenges, it’s easy for students to say, “You write up the first part of the report, and we’ll write up the second.” When

the final product is a single visual, it’s difficult for students to work independently. This format for the challenge has been more successful, because it forces students to interact and collaborate with all members of their teams.

### A ‘No Interference’ Policy

There are two things that we do not do during virtual team projects. First, we don’t tell students what technology they should use to manage their teams. We simply give students a list of their teammates’ e-mail addresses and let the communication begin. From there, some students use Skype for video chats, some create Facebook groups, and some create Google groups. Some choose to communicate only through e-mail.

Teams that use only e-mail are often less successful than those that use social media and video chats. Students who use more robust collaboration technologies tend to build better relationships, experience less conflict, and manage conflicts that arise with more ease. How technology affects team dynamics becomes an important



These advertisements were created by teams comprising students in Russia, Italy, and Hungary as part of a virtual team challenge. Their assignment was to create a visual that would promote knowledge sharing among employees at Russian, Italian, and Hungarian subsidiaries within a single fictional multinational company, while also appealing to viewers in all three cultural contexts. In their final reports, the students explained their choices. In the images shown here (from left to right), teams focused on bike riders moving in different directions to highlight the discord that happens when employees fail to communicate; wooden dolls and a theater stage to represent cultural pride and creativity; the game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* to emphasize what can be achieved through teamwork; and a gold miner as a metaphor for extracting knowledge.

## The Virtual Faculty Challenge

Bettina Gehrke, professor of organizational behavior at SDA Bocconi School of Management in Milan, Italy, has taught two courses that included virtual team projects. Both times, she worked in collaboration with Tatiana Andreeva of St. Petersburg University in Russia.

These virtual projects aren't just challenges for students, she says. They present substantial logistical—and sometimes even emotional—challenges for faculty as well.

"You must pay attention to who your students are, how much experience they have, what their level of frustration is when the virtual collaboration is not working as expected," she says. "Sometimes, as faculty, you have to coach the groups that are not up to the task. This means continuous monitoring by the teacher is necessary—we have to put a lot of energy into this project!"

It also is imperative that faculty pay close attention to details before the project starts, Gehrke says. In many cases, the professors involved in the collaboration may have never met each other in person. For that reason, they must be diligent about maintaining contact to make sure there are no misunderstandings.

Andreeva learned this lesson the first time she delivered a virtual team challenge, before she started working with Gehrke. "In my first experience, my colleague and I decided that I would grade one half of the projects, and she would grade the other half. But when we compared the results, we realized that we were grading very differently!" In the end, Andreeva

says she had to adjust her grading when she discovered that her partner had raised certain expectations with some students.

Andreeva has also discovered that faculty from different schools may face different institutional requirements—a professor at one school may have autonomy, while a professor at another may be required to abide by strict institutional requirements.

Professors who are entering into a long-distance teaching collaboration should spend a great deal of time communicating with each other by e-mail, phone, and Skype or video conference to build rapport and iron out details. They should discuss their grading styles, course criteria, institutional expectations, and communication styles, as well as how they plan to handle any minor issues that arise along the way, say Gehrke and Andreeva.

Most of all, faculty should prepare themselves for an unpredictable semester, Gehrke says. "During most classroom situations, the teacher can 'control' the learning situation. Not here. Faculty *must* be prepared to let their students 'jump into cold water,'" she advises. Once students are involved in the project, faculty then must be responsive to whatever arises, she adds.

"Projects like these are an ongoing, open learning process. Neither teachers nor students can know what's going to happen. That makes the learning experience real."



point of discussion during the debriefing session.

Second, we don't coach students on how to collaborate effectively. We want students to discover on their own the nature of virtual team dynamics—and the conflicts that can arise—as part of the experience.

That doesn't mean that students can't come to us with problems, or that we won't listen with sympathetic ears. But when there is conflict, we want students to try to handle it themselves. We once had a team of Russian and Italian students. Our students here complained about "lazy Italians," while the students in Italy complained that "Russians do not respect deadlines." They even asked if they could turn in different results, with one outcome from Russia and one from Italy.

We told them that was not an option, and they settled the conflict themselves and turned in a single project. We view these moments as opportunities for students to learn what their responsibilities are on multicultural teams.

### Debrief and Reflect

We believe that much of the true learning happens during the debriefing session and in the self-reflective papers students write at the end of the project. That's when students realize what they did right, how they contributed to problems, and what they could have done to avoid conflict.

For example, an Austrian girl attending GSOM SPbU had been so concerned about deadlines that she pressed her teammates to have work ready days before it was due to make sure they had time for

revisions. Her teammates thought she was taking power that had not been delegated to her. She forced the team to stick with their first idea rather than give their creativity time to flow. Their report suffered, because their first idea wasn't very good.

After the project was finished, she came to me to discuss what had happened. She said that this was an enlightening experience, because she realized that she could have had an open discussion with her team about why deadlines were so important to her.

As a result of this project, this student learned to understand herself better, to work across cultures, and to apply strategies that will help her work more effectively on teams in the future. And from our perspective as educators, that's exactly the outcome we want.

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## A Different Kind of Student Exchange

*"Two Markets, Two Universities"*  
University of Massachusetts at Boston  
College of Management

**BY EDWARD ROMAR**

In response to the ways that technology, innovation, and globalization are driving rapid changes in the business environment, the University of Massachusetts at Boston added a new dimension to its business curriculum. "Two Markets, Two Universities" is a 15-week undergraduate course that connects students in Hungary and the U.S. The course is designed to train students to work in cross-cultural teams, navigate time zones, and manage cultural and geographical barriers effectively.

I created "Two Markets" after my Spring 2009 Fulbright Scholarship experience teaching marketing at the University of Pannonia

in Veszprem, Hungary. My goal for the course is to take student exchanges to a new level by simulating a global work environment.

### Transatlantic Project

UMB offered "Two Markets" for the first time in fall 2010, enrolling ten students at our Boston campus and ten students at the University of Pannonia. Students use course delivery tools available in Blackboard, combined with other collaborative technology, to work cooperatively in online environments. Faculty responsibilities are divided between the two universities, although primary teaching responsibilities lie with the University of Massachusetts Boston, which offers the course.

While "Two Markets" includes some lectures, its primary content is the creation of an international marketing plan. At the beginning of the course, students act as members of a team from a prestigious consulting firm. Then, they are divided into four cross-cultural teams, each with the responsibility to prepare a marketing plan for a real company,

